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SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR RS SOCI  
SUBJECT: QUESTIONING PUTIN'S WORK ETHIC

Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle. Reason: 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Rumors about Prime Minister Putin's disengagement from his duties have proliferated in Moscow, suggesting that he has lost his "edge" in making critical decisions on measures linked to the economic crisis. Putin has reportedly been "working from home" on many issues, leaving much of the running of the government to his deputies, particularly First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov. While some here see Putin's withdrawal as increasing the odds that he might step down from office, most continue to emphasize his centrality in the political constellation, with his hands-off behavior reflecting the lack of an acceptable compromise amongst the Kremlin elite on difficult economic issues. End Summary.

¶2. (C) There are consistent reports that Putin resents or resists the workload he carries as Prime Minister to galvanize the Russian bureaucracy. Well-connected XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told us that Putin is said to be "distracted" and "disinterested," leaving day-to-day management of the GOR to Shuvalov. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, who was a member of XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX, said that only Putin has the authority to lead the GOR and, in his absence, economic policy responses to the crisis have been entirely ad hoc. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX saw the ongoing budget revision process as further evidence of Putin's fatigue; in more resolute times, Putin would have ended the fiscal haggling quickly. Instead, it has dragged on for two months during the worst financial crisis in a decade. Prominent XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX agreed about Putin's isolation, saying that the PM is increasingly isolated and has regular contact only with Shuvalov and Kudrin.

¶3. (C) Similarly, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told us that Putin has not been on a regular schedule at the Russian White House, preferring to leave the day-to-day operations of government in the hands of the "actual Prime Minister" Shuvalov, an assessment shared by XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX alleged that there are a number of documents waiting for Putin's signature, several of which are linked to the government's anti-crisis package, that are creating backups in the implementation of important projects. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX told us it is well known that Putin did not like coming to the Russian White House, where he was confronted with stacks of papers on issues of minuscule importance, on which he did not want to expend his energy. The problem, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX noted, was that the Russian system was geared to top-down decisions and paralysis was often the result of Putin's inaction.

¶4. (C) The rise of rumors such as these suggest that Putin may be losing some of his Teflon persona under the pressures of Russia's economic woes, at least among the elite. However, recent Levada surveys reinforce that most Russians continue to see Putin as "running" the country (87 percent of respondents saw him holding his power, up from 74 percent a year ago). While some speculate that Putin's disengagement may presage a readiness to step down from office, most

continue to stress his centrality in the ruling structure and his personal sense as the "savior" of Russia. Indeed, his disengagement reflects his long-standing predilection to prevaricate on difficult issues and his recognition that a sharp reduction in resources limits his ability to find workable compromises among the Kremlin elite.

BEYRLE